

# Culture Matters

## *Rethinking Educational Equity*

Those who are racially marginalized are like the miner's canary: their distress is the first sign of the danger that threatens us all. It is easy enough to think that when we sacrifice this canary, the only harm is to communities of color. Yet others ignore problems that converge around racial minorities at their own peril, for these problems are symptoms warning us that we are all at risk (Guinier & Torres 2002, 11).

Kris D. Gutiérrez

**T**he state of education for non-dominant students<sup>1</sup> in the United States is largely a function of how issues of equity are addressed in social and educational policies and practices. In this country, issues of educational equity are deeply intertwined with a legacy of racial, social, and economic inequality for non-dominant communities. Normative approaches to addressing educational disparities have centered on legal measures or federal and local reforms, without transformation of the historical practices and ideologies that structure inequality and preserve the status quo.

This essay focuses on how reductive notions of culture have been instrumental in fostering and maintaining deficit perspectives of non-dominant students and their communities and, conversely, proposes a more dynamic, nuanced, and processual notion of culture that challenges essentialist views about students and their practices and communities and also informs a new equity framework for educational change.<sup>2</sup> This is an exceedingly important issue, as it has become commonplace to make educational policy for cultural communities without knowing much about the communities, their history, and their shared and varied practices and without examining the assumptions we hold about these communities.

One of the greatest challenges to transforming schools in ways that are meaningful for both the communities they serve and other stakeholders is unearthing the layers of sedimented beliefs and folk knowledge about cultural communities that undergird structure, policy, and practice. There has been a long history in educational policy, research, and practice of problematic uses of the construct of culture – of using culture reductively, categorically, and, often, to unfortunate ends that further marginalize cultural communities and their members.

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<sup>1</sup> I use the term *non-dominant* to refer to students who have been historically marginalized in educational processes in the United States, to capture the collective historical circumstances of these students and account for issues of power relations in schools and other institutions.

<sup>2</sup> There is a well-established literature in this regard that provides a historical account of deficit thinking around non-dominant students (Foley 1997; Valencia 1997).

## Unpacking Cultural Metaphors

Defining culture in ways that foreground deficiency or inadequacy in cultural communities attributes a kind of uni-dimensionality and pathology to entire groups and makes *culture* a blanket term that erases existing variance and complexity in individuals and their communities. Consider how metaphors such as the culture of poverty, cultural deprivation, cultural mismatch, cultural difference, and cultural dissonance are used to explain a deep-seated problem most often attributed to the non-dominant communities themselves. *Culture* here invokes a persistent, unchanging, and generalizable deficit in the community in question. And, by leaching out heterogeneity and complexity, richer and more dynamic notions of culture that would be more adequate to explain an individual or community's history, practices, and repertoires are replaced with

- rigid, narrow, and unitary views of culture;
- a kind of universality that is comprised largely of all that is negative; and
- a one-dimensional and pathological lens through which we view cultural communities.

Although such normative and unitary views of culture have been challenged, educators, policy-makers, and educational researchers continue to rely on cultural explanations for the persistent underachievement of poor, immigrant, and other non-dominant students. Historically, such views have been intimately connected to racial ideologies perpetuating the problem of conflating culture with race and with racial and ethnic groups.

## The Consequences of Conflating Culture and Race

Race, as Guinier and Torres (2002) remind us, is our miner's canary – a constant measure of the state of race relations in our country, a measure of our humanity. So, attending to how race is implicated in prevalent views of culture and cultural communities is central to addressing how we define and re-mediate educational inequities.

Culture is not just one thing. Thus, using categorical explanations that conflate culture with social categories such as race/ethnicity and its proxies – language, ability, and social class – result in overly deterministic, weak, and general understandings of cultural communities and their members, practices, and ways of knowing. The problem of putting people into boxes in which we link culture to group membership minimizes the tremendous diversity within groups that may share a common social or linguistic history.

Consider the common descriptors *diverse student body* or *minority students*. Such descriptions lack specificity, offer little useful information, and promote one-size-fits-all curricular practices and accountability programs that flatten out variance in cultural communities and other relevant subgroups such as English learners. Equating culture with race and ethnicity also facilitates broad generalizations leading to assumptions that members of a cultural community participate in and value the same cultural practices uniformly. In regard to this point, my colleague, Fred Erickson, developed the following analytical mantra: “One hundred percent of

Mexicans do not hit piñatas one hundred percent of the time” to illustrate that, while cultural communities may have generally practiced customs, they are not always carried out by all its members or carried out in similar ways and frequency. Conflating race/ethnicity with cultural practices helps to sustain reductive notions of cultural groups and may help create the rationale for discriminatory social practices and racist ideologies that preserve inequality in educational contexts and beyond.

In the United States, equating culture with race/ethnicity and a focus on cultural traits gave rise to the “cultural styles” approach by researchers who had good reason to challenge deficit-model thinking (in which cultural practices that differ from the practices of dominant groups are considered inferior, strange, or inadequate, without examining them from the perspective of the community’s participants). Despite its genuine attempt to improve student learning, the work on cultural learning styles often leads to analyses that are overly general and categorical and treats cultural differences as static traits, making it harder to understand the relation of individual learning and the practices of cultural communities. Some interpretations of this approach are based on an assumption that an individual’s “style” is constant over time, independent of tasks, contexts, constraints, and mediation. A one-style-per-person assumption based on an individual’s membership in a cultural community does not allow for change in individuals, their practices, or the community itself. We should be particularly concerned with the implications of such applications for students from non-dominant groups (Gutiérrez & Rogoff, forthcoming).

In general, learning-styles approaches have been used to identify the learning styles of “minority” group members, explain “minority” student failure, and make curricular adjustments. For example, individuals from one group may be characterized as learning “holistically,” whereas individuals from another group may be characterized as learning “analytically.” Or, individuals may be divided into “cooperative” versus “individualist” learners on the basis of membership in a particular cultural group. Of concern is that these learning-styles approaches can be highly compatible with reductive literacy programs that address students’ learning needs from the lowest common denominator and, thus, can serve as a quick fix for teachers with little knowledge about and experience with non-dominant students. In efforts to scale up educational improvement, teaching to a difference that can be labeled (e.g., *learning modalities*) sounds appealing to districts or to teachers who have limited resources, support, or training to meet the challenges of new student populations (Gutiérrez & Rogoff, forthcoming).

## The Problem with “Color-Blind” Models

One alternative to the cultural-styles approach – *denying* cultural difference – leads to equally problematic “color-blind” or seemingly race-neutral models. Ruling out discussions of cultural variation has often meant that the cultural practices of the dominant group are taken as the norm. For example, many current educational reform agendas propose new forms of equal educational opportunity through color-blind, race-neutral, merit-based interventions.

This “fairness as sameness” argument has come to dominate the rhetoric of educational reform – obscuring the link between economic disparities, asymmetrical power relations, and historically racialized schooling practices that gave rise to and sustain deeply rooted inequities (Crosland 2004; Gutiérrez & Jaramillo, forthcoming). We see the fairness-as-sameness principle at work in, for example, English-only and high-stakes assessment practices and in standards-based instruction that is neither situated nor dynamic (Crosland & Gutiérrez 2003).

## Looking at Cultural Factors as “Repertoires of Practice”

In my work, I have argued against the common approach in studying cultural communities that assumes that regularities in cultural communities are static and that general traits of individuals are attributable categorically to ethnic-group membership (Gutiérrez 2002). In my recent work with Barbara Rogoff (Gutiérrez & Rogoff 2003), we suggest moving beyond this assumption by focusing attention on variations in individuals’ and groups’ histories of engagement in cultural practices because the variations reside not as traits of individuals or collections of individuals but as proclivities of people with certain histories of engagement with specific cultural activities. Thus, individuals’ and groups’ *experience* in activities – not their *traits* – become the focus of a cultural analysis. We refer to these socially and culturally organized proclivities as *repertoires of practice*.

We, as educators, know little about how to account for variation in cultural communities, and there is little empirical work that illustrates how to document and utilize data about regularities and variation in students. There are many approaches to achieving equity in education. But rethinking current normative views of cultural communities and redefining culture as a resource can help educators find new ways to create robust learning environments for youth, particularly students from cultural communities for whom poverty, immigration, and inferior educational experiences complicate life in schools (Gutiérrez & Rogoff, forthcoming).

## A Cultural-Historical Approach to Learning

A socio-cultural or cultural-historical approach to learning and development provides a way to understand what is cultural about learning (Cole 1996; Engeström 2005; Gutiérrez 2004; Moll 2000; Vygotsky 1978). Relative to this discussion, a cultural-historical approach provides a more dynamic and process-oriented notion of culture in which we can see the relationship between individual learning and its context of development. Human beings use tools (or cultural artifacts) to facilitate their participation in everyday life; therefore, it is impossible to understand the individual without his or her cultural means. Rethinking culture in this way moves us beyond the Cartesian individual and societal divide (Gutiérrez, forthcoming).

An example I have used elsewhere (Gutiérrez, forthcoming, 3–4) illustrates the application of a cultural-historical understanding of culture and learning:

In the domain of literacy, a cultural-historical view helps us conceive of literacy practices as part of a toolkit that is socially and culturally shaped as individuals

participate in a range of practices across familiar, new, and hybrid contexts and tasks. From this perspective we understand that literacy learning is not an individual accomplishment, and instead is built on a history of relationships and influences, both local and distal. For example, if we're interested in understanding the literacy practices of migrant students in California as I am in my own work, a cultural-historical view pushes us to consider both an ecological view of students' learning to understand how repertoires of practice develop (Gutiérrez & Rogoff, 2003), as well as how students' environments and practices also are the consequence of globalization, transmigration, and the intercultural experiences of their everyday lives. In this way, rather than focusing on immigrant students' "linguistic deficiencies" we would focus on the sociohistorical influences on their language and literacy practices, as well as on their social, economic, and educational realities, as Scribner (1990) observed, things mediated by the social, both proximally and concretely, as well as distally and abstractly (Gutiérrez, 2004).

Thus, we would want to understand students' language and literacy practices across at least two activity settings and a range of practices (Engeström, 2005); in doing so, we would be less inclined to rely on analyses that dichotomize home and school or in and out of school practices or to oversimplify what counts as literacy for these youth. Instead, we would focus our analyses on what takes hold as youth move within and across tasks, contexts, and spatial, linguistic, and sociocultural borders. Such an analysis would also encourage us to attend to successful pathways and contextual supports that promote youth's literacy learning. And we would attribute observed regularities in students' practices to their history of participation in familiar cultural practices, to public schooling experiences in California that restrict engagement and limit the use of cultural resources that are part of their repertoires. Such regularities would also be understood, in part, as a historical consequence of colonizing practices of which they have been a part **and** of individuals' strategic use of their toolkit to negotiate movement within and across a range of developmental tasks and contexts. Here we can begin to understand, from a cultural-historical approach, how identity, agency, and history are instrumental to understanding learning.

Culture, from this perspective, can serve as a resource for rethinking the ways we define the cultural practices and toolkits of non-dominant students and can open up new ways of remediating schooling inequalities. Extending this view from a critical race perspective also would make visible the need for a race-conscious, equity-oriented agenda that is not straitjacketed or undermined by historical understandings of culture and cultural communities devoid of historical, socio-political, economic, and ecological analyses. From my perspective, a race-conscious, equity-oriented agenda will always trump the reform *du jour* and can serve as the miner's canary that makes visible how issues of equity have fared throughout the design, implementation, and evaluation stages of local and scaled-up reform.

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